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The Fight to Stay Alive: *AVA* and the Creative Process

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Shahrazad is noted for her story-telling to stave off death in the *1001 Arabian Nights*. Similarly, Ava uses the creative process as a means for survival through recalling and rearranging her life's memories. Ava's re-situation in the impending face of death enables her to create a feminine self which sets her apart from traditional male language. In order to complete this separation, she implements sexualized language, fragmentations and silences into her thought order. In utilizing these approaches, Ava is able to derive meaning from her life and accept her death.

Ava's recounting of her life's memories resembles the tale-telling of the *1001 Arabian Nights*. Just as Shahrazad's story-telling functions as "plain living, survive" (Attar and Fischer n. pag.), Ava relives her experiences in remembering and re-organizing the various events that make up her life, creating a new sense of self as she approaches death. Ava can only make meaning of her life in recalling these experiences and arranging them in a way that is uniquely her own; her thought process serves as a creation that establishes Ava as an artist of her own experience. Just because this arrangement occurs does not make it a creative work. As Alice Flaherty states: "Creativity is not the property of a work in isolation: novelty and value have to be defined in relation to a social context" (54). Ava's narrative is intensified in the presence of death; her account is not merely a "creation," but a representation of her life and an attempt to attach to it a certain value. The social context here is the relationship between Ava and the rest of the world—a placement from which she can ascertain value. Maso describes how Ava's journey seeks out her life's worth: "It's about the search for a legitimate language...for beauty and integrity and wholeness. For meaning, where maybe there is none" (qtd. in Moore 186). In using the creative process to recount her experiences, Ava is able to attach value to her life.

Ava also uses this recollection as a type of healing for her illness in order to come to terms with her death. She aims "[t]o speak in a language that heals as much as it separates," trying to decrease pain as she separates herself from the physical world (163). The language of Ava's thoughts throughout the day

brings about a sort of reconciliation of both her illness and her past encounters. Her account, as Maso says, is “about how a handful of images might make sense of experience” (qtd. in Moore 190). Indeed, Ava recounts “[o]dd conversations, bits of dialogue, letters and now and then, the things that mattered most” (233). In addressing a multitude of subjects, experiences and people to which she has been exposed in her life—music, literature, politics, travel, lovers—she connects her experiences and establishes an underlying value; yet, it is not merely these references that give meaning to Ava’s life. Roseanne Giannini Quinn writes:

Maso has Ava write about much more than experiential recollection using newspaper headlines, film references, quotes from poets and artists, and actual historical accounts. In so doing, Maso quite deliberately employs Ava as a springboard of associative imagination to render a visionary authorial world-view. (101)

Ava becomes the master of her experiences in using her background as a framework and a reference for the meaning of her life’s events. Much like *Shahrazad*, whose strong intellectual background enables her to continue the story-telling that ultimately keeps her alive, Ava’s extensive knowledge makes her memories accessible, preserving both her experiences and her life itself.

This preservation serves as an empowering force, as Ava takes control of her creation. In retelling her story, Ava is able to be as candid as she chooses, which is demonstrated in her detailed account of her intimate relationships: “He dressed me in every conceivable way to suit his erotic whims. I was a shepherdess, a cardinal seated on a red cushion. A nun—of course. A young boy, of course. A woman executive from America. Francesco” (128). As she is uncensored, Ava is free to include and withhold whatever information she pleases. This is similar to *Shahrazad*’s freedom to speak within the context of her tales; in the safety of her stories, she is “borderless, directionless, free to associate” (Attar and Fischer 101). Similarly, Ava becomes “unburdened, dying, free” (78) in speaking openly about and interpreting her past. Says Moore: “[I]t’s...very intimate...this dying” (191). Indeed, we learn not only about Ava’s intimate sexual encounters, but also her innermost thoughts:

How was it I thought that in the end it would be easy?
In the country of Last Hopes.
Could ever be easy? (226)

Ava's thoughts are rearranged and reinterpreted as they come to her, interweaving her inner monologue with past images. As she is unrestricted, Ava is able to develop her narrative as she sees fit. This freedom enables her to derive meaning from her life and helps her to accept her death.

Besides candidness, this creative power breeds self-actualization. Marjorie Worthington asserts that "all narrative leads through obstacles towards eventual knowledge" (244). Ava's collection of memories navigates through her illness to discover the purpose of her existence and to celebrate it. She describes her process as telling "[w]hat the story was—and if not the real story—well then, what the story was for me" (125). In interpreting her life, Ava compiles the pieces of her past to create meaning.

It is imperative, however, that Ava arrange her thoughts in a distinctly feminine style in order for this epiphany to occur. As Worthington states, "[W]hile narrative can be a force that empowers, it simultaneously requires sadistic acts against women to do so. In a traditional narrative format, the woman must be punished, conquered or subdued" (261). In order to shift away from this traditional male narrative, Ava has to adopt her own creative process—a technique that helps make the arrangement of her experiences all the more meaningful to her. In seeking a feminine language that is uniquely her own, Ava controls her story and is able to find value in her life. Only by avoiding the traditional, masculine methods can Ava achieve this power.

Ava's thoughts exude an inherently feminine quality in their sexual structure. This element is necessary for feminine writing, as Giannini Quinn states: "Precisely because women's writing has had such a long history of being restricted, feared, subsumed, censored, disallowed, and misappropriated, under patriarchal dictates, the woman writer...is by definition called upon to violate rules of patriarchal law, linearity, sexuality, and voice" (96). Ava must extend her creation past the limitations of traditional male language, using sexualized text as a feminist strategy. Her pacing resembles the gradual rise of the female orgasm, a tactic seen also in the *1001 Arabian Nights*. Shahrazad builds a story and ends right before its climax to

save for the next night; whereupon the story builds again, this time in a different direction, only to be stopped and saved for the following night. These individual stories are never fully realized, but the smaller rises and falls are nonetheless satisfying for the king to listen to night after night.

So, too, does Ava build certain stories and then change the direction of her train of thought. On one page we see the following thought pattern:

The beautiful woman I could not keep my eyes off of, waltzes into the kitchen, taking the lid from the pot and says, I'm ravishing.

Yes, you are that, I wanted to say, but did not. (80)

Here we learn of a specific encounter between Ava and an Italian woman in a kitchen; yet, we do not fully understand the implications of this event as Ava continues onto other thoughts. It is not until over 150 pages later that we are given further context of the situation and see Ava's assessment of the experience: "And maybe it was the love of women I wanted all along—" (239). Now able to relate this thought to the previous experience and attach importance to it, we have a renewed interest in the event. Ava's final thought—"You are ravishing" (265)—demonstrates the deep, personal meaning of this single encounter. As readers of her creative process, we can only learn of her story in fragments, experiencing the build-ups and releases of her thought pattern. This method of story-telling simulates a sexual pattern that is uniquely feminine.

Deviating from the inherently male plot of rising action, a single climax and resolution, the female pattern includes a series of textual build-ups, climaxes and releases, all of varying degrees. F. Malti-Douglas writes, "It is hardly coincidence...that it is a woman who must break this rhythm, substituting for it a new pattern of desire which, when transposed to the terrain of sexuality, can be seen as a more female approach to pleasure" (21). In this way, Ava's pacing becomes particularly feminine and enables her to adopt an individualistic, female style. Her story-telling reverberates this sexual manner, as Victoria Frenkel Harris describes: "[T]he rhythms of the lines in her prose echo the pulsations of the body" ("An Introduction" n. pag.), or, as Ava claims herself on multiple occasions: "A throbbing. A certain pulsing" (118, 120, 265, more). Using this pattern, Ava's story becomes distinctly feminine.

We see examples of this technique in the way certain phrases are repeated or added on throughout Ava's creative thought process. Identical phrases are often given more weight on their second and third mention. This shift in meaning occurs as we learn more information, as shown by the first and last lines of the following passage:

Try to walk.

Because to love with a vengeance is our best defense.

On the flying trapeze.

I remember that night. He came from out of nowhere.

We were having cocktails outside with the women. I was quite burned by the sun.

My student Daryl Moondance who gave me these purple candles that lit those boats made of zucchini.

He brings back a can of guandu from Ana Julia's kitchen.

A story without a message. He has none to give, and yet he is alive.

Thank you for the tiger lilies and the cats.

And the next morning after hours of lovemaking, he smiles: Try to walk. (89)

We are able to interpret the last line more specifically because we are given the context for its use, whereas with the first line we guess the line to reference a multitude of experiences, such as childhood or a figurative expression for overcoming adversity. Ava does not need this context to recollect her experiences, as she has lived them, but in remembering and then re-remembering, she recalls more details that make her experience all the more human and individually specific. The thoughts that trigger these conclusions are what makes this process a feminine creation.

Yet another strategy Ava adopts in the piecing together of her life's memories is the fragmentation of her experiences to create an overall sense of being. This technique, again, echoes the *1001 Arabian Nights*, as Attar and Fischer note how it is "made up from bits and pieces" (1). Ava, like Shahrazad, takes a multitude of separate stories and weaves them into a complete frame: for Shahrazad, this is the framework for the tales; for Ava, this is her life. This fragmentation can be shown in the erotic song cycle, which is revisited repeatedly throughout her arrangement of memories.

The cycle grows darker over the course of the novel as Ava draws closer to night and closer to her death; however, the mention of the cycle comes in pieces, demonstrating how the notion of death permeates her thoughts throughout the course of the day. The idea of the cycle is so ingrained throughout Ava's recollection that it does not need to be fully introduced at each mention for one to understand what she is referring to, as seen in the following passage:

We were working on an erotic song cycle. It was called *At the Border of Silence*.

It was called *Resonances of the Night*.

We were working on an erotic song cycle. It was called *On the Verge of Disappearing*.

It was called *Like the Sweet Apple That Has Reddened*.
(224-5)

This particular set of cycles shows Ava's move towards death and acceptance. She mentions first how she will be ultimately silenced, as death will rid her of the ability to speak and continue to give voice to her experiences. She moves closer to death, making mention of night and the act of disappearing, as, like darkness, death will sweep the light of Ava's life from the earth. Finally, she comes into acceptance, mentioning how she is like a ripened apple, her life "sweetened" by her experiences. The other cycles spread throughout Ava's account, as they are displayed in a sexual way, aid in this movement towards death in a particularly feminine style.

The silences that separate these fragments, noted by the blank spaces on the page, demonstrate a feminine quality, as women are often distinguished in literature as having space—for lacking male anatomy. Silence, usually a constraint upon women, is used as an empowering technique, as it gives more meaning to what Ava chooses to reveal. Maso explores the weightiness of chosen memories:

The mark of the hand...the breath, the pulse, the tremblings, the pressures, the intrusions of the lived life in the world, the press and the waywardness and intensity of desire—its less than orderly or linear progression—seem to be at work in my fictional "interventions"...The motions of the mind, alive—the motions of consciousness, the longings and yearnings of language, mind, body. The desire for freedom, the desire for wings, for flight, cannot be approximated

without “intervention.” Without deep forays into the silent, the wild, the unknown. (Harris “An Introduction” 107)

These interventions of space function not only to separate and organize Ava’s thoughts, but also to arrange them in a way that gives them certain meaning. In choosing these memories over all others, Ava weighs their importance in the shaping of her life.

The silences also work to give depth to her experiences as she works from them to create a whole. Says Harris: “Silences...constitute omissions only in texts that promise the aesthetic mastery of experience” (“Emancipation” n. pag.). Indeed, Ava’s work in collecting and rearranging her thoughts functions to interpret her experiences, which ultimately gives her life meaning. The silences also show her calming attitude towards death, as her thoughts become more serene nearer her end:

The girl draws an A. She spells her name:

AVA

Today is of course a holiday—

Snow falls like music.

How we celebrated. (265)

In her last thoughts, Ava does not display fear, but joy, mentioning holidays and celebration. Comparing snow to music also creates a peaceful scene; while winter usually symbolizes death, as it may here, Ava finds beauty in this natural process. She is confident in her final moments, boldly making note of her own name. Easing into death with thoughts of beauty, celebration and a strong sense of self, Ava is successful in finding meaning in her life. The pacing of her thoughts is a slow move towards her end—the phrases evenly spaced to illustrate her accepting nature.

This acceptance is, as mentioned before, a gradual process. Ava must collect her thoughts in order to realize her life’s worth and to finally let go. At first, we see her resisting her inevitable end: “I am only thirty-nine. But I am only thirty-nine, Dr. Oppenheim” (55). Ava laments coming to her death at such a young age; yet, as readers of her experience, we see that she has done much in her lifetime. Even still, in this beginning stage of death, Ava does not feel as if her experiences are adequate for an entire lifetime: “There is a necessary melancholy that comes over one when it is realized that there

will remain places unseen, books unread, people untouched. Ferocious, hungry, amorous as I imagined myself to be—” (57). Because Ava is limited by her illness to pursue further travels and relationships, she uses the creative process to relive and explore her own experiences.

After some time working in this way, she comes to blend her memories of travel with images of impending death. This line becomes especially blurred when she travels to obtain treatment for her illness:

She finds herself in her thirty-ninth year on a foreign coast.

Drawing the letter D in the air. (205)

Ava recognizes that this trip is unlike the others and that death looms before her. She comes to accept this death, as we see in her thoughts refusing further treatment: “No. No more chemotherapy. No more potions” (202), and “No more second opinions. It’s OK” (212). These two interjections, ten pages apart, display her revisiting thoughts of death and her finally coming to terms with her fate. Once upset that she would miss out on the rest of her life, Ava finally comes to accept the value of her experiences: “I got to dance. I got to sing. I got to kiss you on the cheek” (261). After recollecting and realizing that her life was filled with many wonderful and individually unique, yet collectively encompassing experiences that accumulate in meaning and value, she is able to come to peace with death, saying: “You place a clay ring on my finger. I go back to earth soon” (212). It is in her ability to make sense of her experiences and to creatively arrange them that she is able to overcome the tragedy of death and to accept her ending.

Ava can only accept her death by making meaning of her life and finding value in her experiences. By initiating a creative process of remembering and reorganizing her life’s events, similar to Shahrazad’s story-telling in *1001 Arabian Nights*, Ava takes power as the artist of her experiences. Ava undertakes the creative process in a specifically feminine way; she uses fragments and silences to create her choice order of thoughts, which result in a calming effect that leads towards acceptance of her death. In this process, Ava gives meaning to her life.

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